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Other People's Mail

Former Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms has now told the Church committee that he knew the agency's mail opening program of 1952-1973 was illegal but went ahead with it anyway. Mr. Helms, C.I.A. boss from 1966 to 1973, not only continued to operate his predecessors' illegal program but made sure he would never be told by a President to stop. He simply never told Presidents what was going on. "You've got to protect the President from the dirty stuff," he said.

That is an old excuse, and a threadbare one. It suggests Presidents approve of dirty stuff as long as they can't be tied to it. But in fact even when President Nixon flatly said he did not approve of the C.I.A. opening people's mail, the practice continued, at Mr. Helms's direction. He didn't care about the President. James Angleton, former C.I.A. chief of counterintelligence, gave a more honest answer last month. He said he could not believe that orders from anybody outside the agency were supposed to be obeyed. He was shocked that anyone thought otherwise.

The mail-opening program went far beyond anything any rational intelligence-gathering agency would have embarked on. The C.I.A. opened letters

to Senator Church, Senator Edward Kennedy, presidential candidate Richard Nixon, etc, etc. It probably could not have done this if some controls outside the agency had existed. It by no means exonerates the Helmses and Angletons to say this, but the fact is the rogue elephant had some very timid handlers. Former Postmaster General J. Edward Day testified that when Mr. Helms, his then boss Allen Dulles and another C.I.A. official called on him in 1961 to tell him about the operation, he refused to listen. He said he didn't want the responsibility for keeping secrets. Some other Cabinet officials and some members of Congress charged with overseeing the C.I.A. took the same approach.

Unlike many of the illegal activities brought to light by the recent investigations of the C.I.A., the mail openings are still subject to criminal penalty. The statute of limitations has not run out. The public has a right to hear from the Justice Department what it plans to do about that. More importantly, the public has a right to hear from the President and Congress what they plan to do to make sure that neither this agency nor any other can, in the near or distant future, so easily violate the Constitution and laws of the United States.